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ABSTRACT

The central theme of "To Kill a Mockingbird," one of the most widely taught novels in high school English classes, is frequently misinterpreted by well-meaning teachers. Although the cause of racial justice deserves classroom attention, the central theme and the focus of the four significant parts of the novel--the opening words, the closing sentences, the ending of Part One, and the beginning of Part Two--is Jem's struggle for maturity. By relating the elements of the narration to Jem's growth, students can grasp the structure of the novel and the significance of the maturation theme. (JM)

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WILL THE REAL MOCKINGBIRD PLEASE STAND UP?

by Theodore W. Hipple

There is evidence to suggest that *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is well on its way to becoming one of the most widely taught novels in our high school English classes. It is appearing with increasing regularity on curriculum guides, its paperbound sales to schools are up, and it is commonly selected by high school students as one of their favorites.

This is, in my judgment, progress of a high order. When a recent best-seller is sufficiently well done for high school use, as *To Kill a Mockingbird* most assuredly is, and is not completely salacious, as too many of the recent best-sellers are, and is, moreover, selected by many high school students as their own reading choice, then that book ought to receive consideration for a place in the English curriculum. That *To Kill a Mockingbird* is earning this place is an indication that English teachers are not, as some students have suggested, rooted too deeply in literature written before 1900.

The one nagging concern I have about the increased use of of this novel is that I sense from conversations with many students and teachers that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is being distorted into a racial polemic and is used by well-meaning teachers to serve the cause of racial justice. It may be somewhat uncharitable to carp when such good motive underlies a false interpretation of a novel, but, however good the intention of making the case of Tom Robinson the moral center of the novel, the fact remains that this interpretation somewhat misses the mark and focuses on but one of the many aspects of the novel deserving classroom attention. Interestingly, too, the movie version demonstrates the same partial interpretation, almost wholly ignoring, for one example, the importance of the Mrs. Dubose episode.

The mood of our times easily accounts for this sidetracking. Racial concerns are very much with us today and have a legitimate place in the literature program of the high schools; it seems right, therefore, to seize the timely part of a novel and to overlook the less newsworthy whole. For example, Edwin Bruell ("Keen Scalpel on Racial Ills," *EJ*, Dec., 1964) compares *To Kill a Mockingbird* with *Cry, The Beloved Country* as offering useful insights into racial

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matters for high school students. That, assuredly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* does, but it does so incidentally and thus differs from *Cry, The Beloved Country*, the major theme of which is the injustice in Paton's South Africa. An earlier article of mine ("Through Literature to Freedom," *EJ*, Feb., 1966) included *To Kill a Mockingbird* on a list of many novels which may be examined for their statements about black/white relationships, but I tried to point out that racial questions do not form the central theme of the novel. Yet in conversations I have had with high school students who have recently read *To Kill a Mockingbird* as classroom assignments, they seem able to recall only the Tom Robinson incident when asked about the major impact of the novel.

Whether a teacher is too limiting their view of the novel or whether this incident, of itself, stands out for these students, the point is that they are unable to explain correctly the appeal *To Kill a Mockingbird* has for them. I submit that high school students react favorably to reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* for much the same reason that they react favorably to such novels as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Red Badge of Courage, The Catcher in the Rye*, and *A Separate Peace*. In truth, if *To Kill a Mockingbird* is to be compared with another novel, it should be one of these. Each of these novels has, as its dominant theme, the story of a boy going through some extremely difficult problems in his struggle to become an adult. It is Jem, not Tom Robinson or Atticus or Scout, who should command our attention in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is his story, very much a part of which, but only a part, is the Tom Robinson episode.

The story of Jem Finch differs from those of Huck Finn, Henry Fleming, Holden Caulfield, and Gene Forrester in a variety of ways, but the most obvious, and possibly the reason for the frequent misreading I have alluded to, is that of the author's point of view. In most novels of a youth's struggle for maturity, the youth tells his own story. (Note Dickens' novels, for example.) Henry Fleming, it is true, does not narrate *The Red Badge of Courage*, but he is so clearly the central character, with the other characters often unnamed shadow figures, that attention is inevitably drawn to him. Not so with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is Scout, Jem's younger sister, who narrates the novel and, because she occasionally assumes center stage, the attention of high school readers may not be drawn to Jem as much as if he were the narrator. I suggest, therefore, that

teachers of English must take special pains to assure that their readers understand the importance of this theme of Jem's growing up.

It is not at all difficult to make a compelling case for this point of view. And, in making such a case, English teachers can help their students learn something of the way the structure of a novel is related to its theme. Further, since the students will be examining the novel themeselves, rather than being told its theme and structure by their teachers, they can gain some important skills in the study of literature.

While many of the major episodes of the novel involve Scout or Atticus, all of them, save the few pages on Scout's first day of school and on the missionary society meeting, involve Jem and in most of them he is the central figure if one examines the impact of the episode on the characters involved in it. To cite just a minor instance which shows how it is Jem whose reactions Miss Lee intended that we consider, one can look at the gifts Scout and Jem find placed in the tree. To the young Scout they are a mysterious bounty and have little more significance than that for her. To Jem, however, they clearly mean something more and give him pause in his thoughts about Boo Radley. The care he exercises in storing these gifts afford but one indication of the effect they have on this lad who is leaving childhood for adolescence.

But other evidence is even more compelling. The opening words of the novel, the closing sentences, the ending of Part One and the beginning of Part Two are about Jem. These are positions of crucial importance in any novel, its beginning and ending and major divisions, and students attention must be drawn to them. In fact, students can discover for themselves that Jem's growth is the theme of the novel if they are simply asked to identify and then signify the commonality in these four places in the novel.

Once they come to see the importance of Jem's maturing process, the other parts of the novel begin to fall into place. Without this insight, however, some students are sure to be confused by certain episodes, for example, Atticus's shooting of the mad dog. In a novel that focuses on race, that incident seems incongruous; in a novel about a boy's growing up, however, that incident, revealing as it does that boy's understanding of his father, is not only appropriate but significant. One can handle almost all the episodes of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in a similar fashion. Translated into classroom practice, this procedure suggests that teachers ask their students what effect differing aspects of the novel have on Jem.

The first major concern Jem exhibits is the mysterious figure on the corner. Unlike Scout, he is now old enough that the old bogey man business, while still possessing some unsupported validity, is not sufficient to keep him from thinking of Boo Radley. Goaded by dares from Scout and Dill, Jem approaches and actually touches the house. It is Jem, too, who loses his trousers in the children's nocturnal adventures and later finds them, patched and folded, when he sneaks back for them. Surely a new dimension has been added to his thinking about this bogey man.

Later Jem is the one who benefits most from the shooting of the rabid dog. Ashamed that Atticus is too old to play in the church fathers' football game, Jem is on the verge of losing respect for his father. His sense of masculine balance is restored, though, when Atticus shoots down the mad dog, something even that ubiquitous symbol of bravery and courage, the sheriff, is afraid to do. That Jem has gained a degree of maturity from this occurrence is seen moments later when he abjures Scout from telling of Atticus's feat to the whole community. Scout, Jem suggests, is too young to understand it, but he now knows that he once again has before him the male model that all growing boys so desperately need.

It is in the Mrs. Dubose incident that Jem clearly emerges as the central figure of the novel. In what can best be described as his last vestiges of boyhood, he throws a tantrum and ruins Mrs. Dubose's camelia bed. His punishment is that he has to read to her each day, not knowing that this reading is helping Mrs. Dubose free herself from an addiction to drugs. The lesson Jem learns about the meaning of real courage (as opposed, for example, to the stealth-in-the-night kind of tactics later exhibited by Bob Ewell) is one he will not soon forget; it is, moreover, an important point in his progress toward manhood. And, thus, Part One ends with Jem's fingering the petals of the camelia that Mrs. Dubose, in a final double-edged gesture both of reproach and of forgiveness, had ordered given to him at her death.

Part Two begins with the sentence "Jem was twelve." It is in Part Two that the Robinson-Ewell trial becomes the dominant episode, but it is, like the other major portions of the novel, an episode that importantly involves Jem. When Atticus is guarding the jail and confronting the mob bent on hanging the imprisoned Tom Robinson, Jem, Scout, and Dill appear. While it is true that Scout's ingenuous conversation serves to help disperse the mob, Jem is the

reason that Scout is there; his openly having defied Atticus's orders to take Scout and Dill home and, instead, choosing to stay to offer physical assistance to Atticus, if it is needed, sets the stage for Scout's comments. Scout, indeed, expects Jem "to get hell for not going home," but notices instead that Atticus massages his son's hair in a gesture of affection.

The trial itself, though Jem is but an onlooker, offers additional evidence of the theme of the novel. A fruitful way to have high school students learn something about reading a novel is to have them note and attempt to explain any changes in character that take place in the novel. Jem changes most during the trial. Unlike Atticus, he does not believe that Tom Robinson will be convicted. So convinced is he of the logical superiority of Atticus's argument and of the patent lies of Mayella and Bob Ewell that he is crushed and, at the same time, ushered brusquely from the world of childhood idealism into the world of adult realism by the eventual verdict of guilty. He even cries at the outcome, but this is the last time he will cry as a child; even this instance is the lament of a near-man for a society that is not, and perhaps never will be — a society in which the Tom Robinsons and the Bob Ewells are examined and judged on the basis of the character of their lives and not the color of their skins.

Miss Maudie is the first person to recognize this new maturity in Jem. The day after the trial she gives Jem, Scout, and Dill some cake, but, where before her custom had been to make one big cake for her own needs and three little ones for the children, she has this time made little cakes for only Scout and Dill. Jem is served from the big, or adult, cake.

The ending of the novel again displays Jem's growth. After yelling to Scout to run home, Jem grapples with Bob Ewell, in effect sacrificing himself to whatever may ensue so that his little sister may be saved. Boo Radley rescues Jem as much as he does Scout, for surely Ewell is bent on the destruction of both of them, and then carries Jem home. Atticus mistakenly thinks that Jem has killed Ewell and, as an adult, must stand trial for his crime. Once Sheriff Heck Tate has explained what really happened, the novel can end with Atticus sitting by his son's bed waiting for Jem to come out of his slight concussion. When Jem does awake, there will be no kiss; instead, there will be a man-to-man handshake or, perhaps, a playful massage on the head.

What the foregoing has attempted to suggest is that teachers of English who use *To Kill a Mockingbird* with their classes must help their students recognize that Jem's growth is central to both the theme and the structure of the novel. This same theme, of course, helps explain the appeal of the novel to high school students who are naturally interested in stories that treat honestly of the very struggles they are going through.

Finally, a teacher's taking this approach to the novel can provide his students with useful tools for examining any novel. He must involve his students in a close scrutiny of the beginning and ending passages and of the major divisions so that they see common strains; he must help his students note the incidents the author has chosen to include in terms of the characters he has chosen to write about; he must get his students to observe changes in characters and to try to explain these changes. All of these activities, put into the proper perspective of the novel as a whole, can help students see that, while any good novel is greater than any of, or the sum of, its parts, the examination and understanding of that novel can proceed fruitfully if selected parts are first considered.

Used with *To Kill a Mockingbird,* these suggestions can produce significant classroom results. For one, Jem can be seen in his true light. And this, after all, is what the book is all about.